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AUTHOR	Angelisi, Mary Ann
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ABSTRACT

In a third-grade classroom, a 3-week-long study was conducted on the pros, cons, and effects of three particular spelling strategies and activities. By focusing on two specific spelling strategies--phonemic awareness and word identification--the study hoped to indicate that conventional rote learning, drilling, and memorization do not help children retain spelling words on a long-term basis. Children benefit from less conventional learning techniques that encourage them to explore relationships, discover the connection between letters and sounds, find word patterns, and independently decode contextual meanings of words. The 25 students in the class focused on three distinct spelling lessons originating from their reading series, consisting of 12 words in each lesson. Word charts were relied upon for displaying certain word structures and families; in addition, students played spelling bingo and used visual aids such as Venn diagrams and art materials. Prior to each lesson, a pretest of the spelling words was administered to determine prior knowledge. Children were divided into three groups, and each week each group was taught using a particular strategy. Results indicated that the traditional "drill and write" method caused all three groups to feel more frustrated and tense at completing the sentences, definitions, and workbook pages independently. Phonemic awareness and word recognition proved to be more successful in elevating the students' concentration, eagerness to learn, independent and cooperative work habits, and confidence. (Contains 6 tables and 10 references.) (NKA)

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TEACHING SPELLING:
WHICH STRATEGIES WORK BEST

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Mary Ann Angelisi
Lehman College
Dr. Abigail McNamee

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WHICH STRATEGIES WORK BEST

INTRODUCTION

Trends in education have shifted, over the years, from teaching children to read phonemically to teaching children to read more holistically. The so-called 'Reading Wars' between phonics and whole language have brought many educators to a standstill. We have begun asking ourselves: Do I stop teaching phonics? How do I improve my students' reading? Should I change the way I teach? The answers to these questions have many pros and cons; and yet still many educators remain baffled.

I, firmly, believe that all children can read and that using different approaches may help to improve their reading abilities. However, why is it that advances in teaching reading have not, exactly, led to better student spellers? Research indicates that the number of children lacking in basic spelling skills is increasing in our nation (Gentry and Gillet, 1993, p. 55). In fact, if you are an educator, then you do not need research to tell you that more and more children are entering upper primary and middle school grades still relying upon such basic techniques such as sound and invented spelling. More and more children are entering these grades lacking the basic proofreading and editing skills accompany spelling (Gentry and Gillet, 1993, p. 55); thus, they have to start from scratch in order to improve these skills.

Why is the rate of poor student spellers growing? Perhaps the reason lies not in the way students learn, but in the way they are taught. I can remember, as a child, memorizing a list of spelling words over and over again until I was able to recite them

robotically. Did that make me a better speller as I became older? Not entirely. Even today, I consider myself an average speller. I wonder, therefore, if students are still being taught in the same 'drilling' method that I was taught by. What kind of an affect does this old-fashioned, rote-learning method have on children? Does it really help them to retain and recall their spelling words, or does it hinder them from learning how to spell better? Does using phonics rules help children remember spelling words better? Do students learn better and spell better if they are taught by other less conventional methods? The bottom line is: which strategy(ies) works best in improving childrens' spelling? By conducting a three-week long study on the pros, cons, and affects of three particular spelling strategies and activities, on my own third grade class, I hope to find some answers to these perplexing questions.

It has often been said that the English language is the most difficult, of all languages, to read, write, speak and understand. There are only 26 letters of the alphabet; however, there are many phonics and spelling rules that correspond with each letter. It is virtually impossible for a child to remember them all and know when to use them. I bet that there are many teachers out there who do not even recall every rule. I admit that I don't. There are many phonics and spelling rules that are not even as concise as they appear to be (Gentry and Gillet,1993, p. 55). Take the famous 'i before e' rule for example. Created to help children remember the vowel clusters ie and ei, the rule stipulates that ei should only follow the consonant c. This rule does, indeed, help children in remembering how to spell words such as receive and lies. However, what if students encounter words such as weigh or eight? The 'i before e'; rule, obviously, cannot be applied to such words; and would therefore, not be of much help to children in learning

how to spell those words. If certain phonics and spelling rules are not enough, what else can children rely on to help them become better spellers?

SPELLING STRATEGIES:

a. Spelling Patterns--Encouraging students to search for certain spelling patterns in words can help them remember the spelling of the words better (Snowball, 1997, p. 34). For example, students can associate words by discovering familiar consonant clusters, vowel clusters, prefixes, suffixes, rhyming patterns, etc.

b. Phonemic Awareness--Early primary children, especially, benefit greatly from learning, early on, how to develop phonemic awareness when learning how to read, write, and spell (Snowball, 1997, p. 34). For instance, a colleague of mine, actually, uses a technique, known to many educators, as syllable tapping. As she teaches basic monosyllable and more challenging multi-syllable words to her first grade class, she encourages them to listen for the syllables and clap their hands or tap their desks for every syllable they hear. Her students learn to rely upon their senses in helping them sound out the syllables of words, which, inturn, will, eventually, aid them in learning how to spell the words better.

c. Word Identification/Word Recognition--Advocates of whole language learning cite word identification, synonymous with word recognition, as positive, beneficial techniques in helping children become better spellers, readers, and writers.

Frank Smith, a major proponent in the movement towards whole language teaching and learning, believes that by associating words through meaning, sound, and context, children retain a better knowledge of the relationship between words. For example,

teaching children to break down large, unfamiliar words into smaller, more recognizable words helps them to, eventually, decipher the meaning of those tough words. With practice, they learn how to decode the contextual meanings of words, independently, without much assistance from a teacher or other grown-up (Gentry, 1998, p. 28).

The most recent and famous development, born from the whole language movement, are word walls or words charts. Such instruments can be used to display various word structures, from short, basic site words to broader vocabulary and definitions. The basic premise behind word walls or word charts is that students can visually be reminded of any words that may be useful in helping them decode the meanings of words, remember spelling and writing patterns of words, etc. (Gruber, 1999, p. 64).

I will focus on two of the specific spelling strategies, which are listed above--phonemic awareness and word identification. Specifically, I will:

1. explore various learning strategies for students in the teaching of spelling, in order to assess which strategies would be more beneficial to students and which would possibly hinder their growth and progress.
2. explore and experiment with various developmentally appropriate activities that accompany such learning strategies.
3. reflect on my own teaching techniques, recognize my weaknesses, and further develop my strengths.

By focusing on particular spelling strategies, I hope to indicate that conventional rote learning, drilling, and memorization does not help children retain spelling words on a long-term basis, as much as other strategies do; children benefit from less conventional learning techniques that encourage them to explore word relationships, discover the

connection between letters and sounds, find word-patterns, and independently decode contextual meanings of words. Besides the old-school 'drill and write' method, I intend to use phonemic awareness and word recognition strategies in teaching my third graders three spelling lessons over a period of three weeks. I am hoping to reveal which strategy(ies), if any, works best in improving my students' spelling.

THE CHILDREN:

I worked with my own third grade class, consisting of a total of twenty-five children, ranging in age from seven to nine, in a parochial school environment in the Bronx, New York. Having attended this same school from pre-school age, this class is very familiar and comfortable with eachother. Academically, these third graders perform on an average learning level, with spelling test scores, thus far, in the range of 73% to 100%. Over the past three months, I have noticed particular weaknesses in spelling amongst many of the children. For instance, since sound spelling is a strategy hat many of them rely upon, words such as 'rises', as in 'the sun rises at dawn' is often spelled as 'rizes'. Very often, I have noticed, that they think and write based in instinct and sound; thus, a word such as 'stick' is often written as 'stk'. I hope to improve and strengthen such weaknesses through this study, by broadening and extending their spelling methods well beyond simple sound spelling.

THE MATERIALS:

I focused on three distinct spelling lessons, originating from our reading series, consisting of twelve words in each lesson. Table-1 indicates the word list for each lesson:

Table-1:

Lesson 5 "Consonant Clusters"	Lesson 16 "Homophones"	Lesson 29 "Compound Words"
street	one	outside
strike	here	bedroom
spray	hear	football
screen	won	airplane
spread	eight	someone
burst	hour	birthday
scream	our	cannot
strong	ate	classroom
string	seen	homework
scratch	blue	playground
strange	scene	everything
sprout	blew	sidewalk

In conjunction with these word lists, I relied upon the use of a word chart for displaying certain word structures and families, the literary stories that the words were extracted from, flashcards, sentence strips, spelling games I often play with my students such as spelling bingo, visual aids such as Venn diagrams and Webs, and art materials.

THE EVALUATION:

Besides administering a standard written test for each spelling lesson, daily observation and evaluation of students and their work was necessary for assessment of their spelling progress and skills. Samples of tests, as well as student work, are demonstrated.

THE PROCEDURE:

Prior to the teaching and learning of each spelling lesson, a pre-test of the spelling words was administered in order to determine any prior knowledge of the spelling of such words by the students. Each pre-test consisted, simply, of my introduction of each

word in isolation, followed by a sentence for clarification, as the students wrote down the spelling of each word. Each pre-test was administered at the beginning of each week. A lesson test was administered at the end of each week. Throughout each week, the class of twenty-five students was divided into three groups consisting of 8 students, 8 students, and 9 students, respectively. Table-2 indicates the teaching schedule created for the purposes of this study:

Table-2: Teaching Schedule:

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Week 1: lesson 5 Strategy employed: phonemic awareness	lesson 16 drill and write	lesson 29 word recognition
Week 2: lesson 16 Strategy: word recognition	lesson 29 phonemic awareness	lesson 5 drill and write
Week 3: lesson 29 Strategy: drill and write	lesson 5 word recognition	lesson 16 phonemic awareness

As Table-2 indicates, I taught each group of students, each week, a particular lesson, using a particular strategy. Specific criteria corresponded with each teaching strategy used:

a. Drill and Write--This traditional rote learning method consisted of asking the students to write all words three times each, research the definition for each word, comprise a sentence for each word, and complete, independently, all workbook pages for each lesson.

b. Phonemic Awareness--I encouraged the students to sharpen their phonemic skills

through the use of flash cards, syllable tapping, and discovering rhyming patterns for each word.

c. Word Recognition--Using a word chart, I devised a way that my students can use word families to decipher the sound and meaning of words. Table-3 demonstrates such a method:

Table-3: Decoding using word recognition of word families:

example word: ice-skating

Actual dialogue between myself and my students:

teacher: This word is 'ice-skating'. How many syllables does this word have? Let's tap the word.

students: ice-skating

teacher: If you had trouble figuring out how to say this word, what words could you use that rhyme with each syllable?

students: Nice rhymes with ice.
Late goes with skate.
Ring has ing in it.

teacher: Good. Let's put it together. If you know nice than you know ICE (students); if you know late than you know SKATE (students); and if you know ring than you know ING (students).

Such decoding enables students to rely upon basic sight words that they already know of to aid them in sounding out and learning more difficult words. Certain one-syllable sight words are, already, hung about in my classroom for the students reference.

THE FINDINGS:

The 'drill and write' method caused all three groups of students to feel more frustrated and tense at completing the sentences, definitions, and workbook pages independently, without any other sources to reach out for help from. Not only did they seem bored when

asked to perform such tasks; but this rote-learning technique did not seem to strengthen or sharpen many of the students' attention or memory spans. When asked to recall a particular word, in a different sentence than they had written, for instance, many of the students demonstrated difficulty in associating the meanings of the words enough to synthesize them into expanded sentences. The contextual meanings of the words seemed less important to the students than completing the written tasks at hand, which each group, gradually and naturally, grew to resent as they took turns being taught using other techniques.

For example, Group 1 was taught lessons 5 and 16 using phonemic awareness and word recognition, which better engaged their perceptions of the spelling and the meanings of the words and, also, offered them the freedom to better explore what learning techniques they benefit from and use those learned methods in the future to help them with other, more difficult spelling lessons. However, by the time this group of students were taught lesson 29 and were, simply and repeatedly, asked to "Write each word three times; start looking up the definitions for each word and write your own sentence for each word; you have one week to finish all of this including the workbook pages and whatever is not finished in class, must be finished for homework; don't forget that there is a test on Friday", those children, truly, seemed shocked and resentful that for two weeks, they were not demanded to perform such tasks, particularly on their own, nor were they, for this last week, going to have any opportunity to be able to learn those spelling words by using any of the manipulatives they had been using such as the flash cards, the games they had been playing, such as Bingo, or by assisting

eachother, in pairs, and decoding the words via help from the word walls or word chart. Those poor students seemed dumbfounded and frightened. For that last week, Group 1 had to rely on whatever rote, memorization skills they could muster, which for many students, is not easy to acquire independently.

Phonemic awareness and word recognition proved to be more successful in elevating the students' concentration, general interest and eagerness to learn, their independent and cooperative work habits, and confidence. During each week that each group of students was taught using phonemic awareness, the students were encouraged to broaden their own learning through the use of certain manipulatives such as flash cards, puzzles, Bingo games, etc. Such an array of useful tools, along with being given the freedom to use them, proved to be very positive, particularly in learning lesson 5, based on consonant clusters, and lesson 16, based on homophones. After demonstrating a set of purchased flash cards, for example, depicting a specific set of homophones, such 'here' on one side and 'hear' on the other, the students, freely and ambitiously, decided to create their own set of flashcards, containing other homophones not included in the spelling list. Such determination seemed to permeate even throughout the spelling lessons taught by word identification. By teaching the students how to decode each word, using smaller, more recognizable, one-syllable words, they were able to pronounce the words better, without feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. The students seemed to absorb this strategy into their own psyche; thus, using it all on their own, as they read, cooperatively, the literature story that accompanied the spelling lists. They were not afraid to rely on eachother for help in decoding the words; and gradually, less and less eyes shot up to glance at the word walls or word chart for assistance. The ability to decode words, through

recognition, slowly, became ingrained in their learning; and it has become a skill that will, hopefully, be sharpened and refined as they develop and progress even further.

Although test scores should be of little importance, for they can never do justice to proving the true, inner, personal strengths and wisdom of children, they have been demonstrated nonetheless in Table-6:

Table-6: Range of Final Test Scores of All Spelling Lessons Taught Using Each Particular Teaching Strategy

	Group 1	Group 2	Group3
phonemic awareness	95%-100%	100%	100%
word identification	100%	100%	100%
drill and write	92%-100%	88%-100%	100%

Test scores indicate that Group 3 succeeded in learning every spelling lesson, throughout all three methods used. Group 1 faired the best using word identification as a successful learning strategy, while Group 2 received the highest rate of success through the use of phonemic awareness and word recognition.

What do these scores indicate? True, the 'drill and write' learning style proved, overall, to be the least successful in engaging students' attention and memory by the end of the week; however, as the scores show, the 'drill and write' method did not lose out by much, exactly, compared to the other two. What does this observation indicate? Throughout this study, when encouraged to broaden their thinking and to incorporate other means of learning tools, the majority of the students, really, flourished and thrived on such unique learning styles, as evidenced through their test scores, as well as their whole persona and demeanor throughout this study. However, when told to revert back

to 'old-schooling' methods, such as workbook pages, definitions, memorization, the students' genuine love for learning, greatly, diminished, despite the fact that their test scores indicate a slight decrease compared to the other two methods used. The bottom line is: ask children to perform the same, mundane and menial tasks that many of them have been used to throughout their education and they will only go as far as they have gone and their overall outlook on learning will not waver by much; however, add a new and more interesting twist to learning, and they will become more interested in learning themselves. Hopefully, they will savor and feed that love for learning throughout their futures.

CONCLUSION:

Conducting this study on the possible affects that certain teaching strategies have on students in improving their spelling skills has taught me that how I was taught as a child, albeit satisfactory then, is no longer good enough for our students now. The old-school, rote learning teaching methods of yesteryear may have gotten the job done, so to speak, and they may continue to serve a satisfactory purpose in classrooms even today; however, our children, in this day and age, deserve better. They deserve to be given the freedom and independence to choose and explore what works for them, whether it be a bunch of flash cards or a bunch of words stuck on a wall. They deserve to be taught and encouraged to feel free to express themselves beyond what the workbook challenges them to do. They deserve to be taught and encouraged to love learning because learning can be fun and exciting, not dull, drab, and boring as their workbook pages, continuously, seem to be.

In conducting this study, I learned that the responsibility of teaching students how to be better successful, more eager and independent, and less stressed or frustrated learners falls on the teacher. How we teach children is more important than what we teach them, exactly, because the strategies we teach them by, if the methods are valuable, useful, and engaging tools, can, quite possibly, remain with them forever. It frustrated me, throughout this study, to have to teach a different group of children, each week, through such an old-school learning method as the 'read, write, memorize, and don't ask any questions' kind that I used--the kind of technique that disengaged them the most. My biggest fear was that I would deter them from ever demonstrating an eagerness or willingness to explore and try new learning experiences, as well as discourage them from ever again acquiring an avid love for learning in my classroom. Thank goodness, those fears have not been confirmed, for they still continue, today, to flock to those same tools that provided such a comfortable escape from the mundane word of definitions and memorization. Their two favorites?--Spelling Bingo and our Word Chart.

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